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Pope arrives in Mexico as 'pilgrim of faith, of hope, and of love'

Francis X. Rocca Catholic News Service | Mar. 23, 2012

SILAO, Mexico (CNS) -- Arriving in Mexico on his second papal visit to Latin America March 23, Pope Benedict XVI said he came as a "pilgrim of faith, of hope, and of love," promoting the cause of religious freedom, social progress and the Catholic Church's charitable works.

Bells tolled and the assembled crowd cheered as Pope Benedict XVI appeared through the door of his Alitalia plane at Guanajuato Internal Airport in central Mexico. He was greeted by Mexican President Felipe Calderon and other dignitaries, including Archbishop Jose Martin Rabago of Leon and Archbishop Carlos Aguilar Retes of Tlalnepantla, president of the Mexican bishops' conference and the Latin American bishops' council, CELAM.

In his remarks at the arrival ceremony, Pope Benedict paid tribute to the Mexican people's religious faith and reputation for hospitality, but he addressed the main part of his speech to all Latin American nations, noting that most of them "have been commemorating, in recent years, the bicentennial of their independence."

The pope related the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity to challenges the region faces today. In doing so, the pope highlighted themes that he is likely to address again during his time in Mexico and Cuba, where he travels March 26.

Faith fosters social peace based on respect for human dignity, the pope said, adding that "this dignity is expressed especially in the fundamental right to freedom of religion, in its full meaning and integrity."

That statement has special resonance given that the pope was speaking in the Guanajuato state, heartland of a 1920s rebellion by Catholic "Cristero" rebels against an anti-clerical regime.

Mexico long prohibited church-run schools and the public display of clerical and religious garb, but the country's Senate is now considering an amendment to the constitution that would significantly expand the church's freedom in areas, including education.

Catholics in Cuba still operate under severe restrictions under the communist government there.

Addressing an economically underdeveloped region plagued by violence, corruption and dramatic inequalities of wealth, the pope presented Catholicism as a force for social progress. Christian hope does not only console believers with consonance in an afterlife, he said; it inspires them to "transform the present structures and events which are less than satisfactory and seem immovable or insurmountable, while also helping those who do not see meaning or a future in life."

"This country and the entire continent are called to live their hope in God as a profound conviction, transforming it into an attitude of the heart and a practical commitment to walk together in the building of a better world," Pope Benedict said.

He then noted the concrete help that Catholics, motivated by charity, offer "those who suffer from hunger, lack

shelter, or are in need in some way in their life."

This charitable mission "does not compete with other private or public initiatives," the pope said, and the church "willingly works with those who pursue the same ends." That point was particularly relevant to Cuba, where Catholic charities have become notably active in recent years, sometimes in cooperation with agencies of the communist state.

Addressing his Mexican hosts once again as he concluded, Pope Benedict made an apparent reference to the country's recent fighting among drug traffickers, which has killed an estimated 50,000 people over the past five years.

"I will pray especially for those in need," the pope said, "particularly for those who suffer because of old and new rivalries, resentments and all forms of violence."

Calderon told the pope, "Mexico feels honored to be the first Spanish-speaking country you've visited in (Latin America)."

The president touched on the difficulties Mexico has endured in recent years, including the current drought -- the worst in 70 years -- natural disasters and the H1N1 outbreak in 2009, which compounded an especially difficult economic downturn. He mentioned violence, too, which has claimed nearly 50,000 lives during his administration.

"In spite of it all, we're still standing," Calderon said, adding, "because Mexico is a strong people ... a people of values."

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Contributing to this story was David Agren.

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